

Related U.S. Application Data

continuation-in-part of application No. 11/185,198, filed on Jul. 19, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,894,932, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/185,467, filed on Jul. 19, 2005, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/185,957, filed on Jul. 19, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,894,933.

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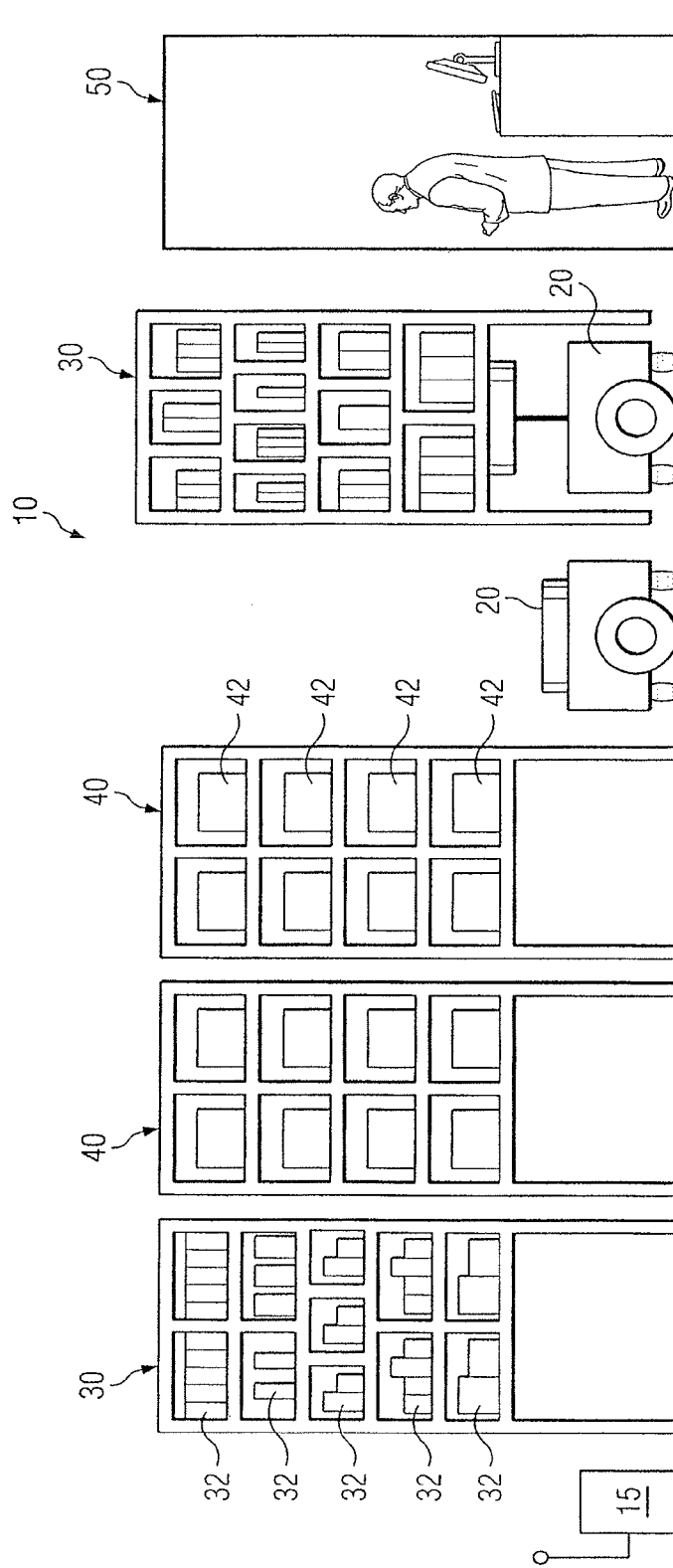


FIG. 1

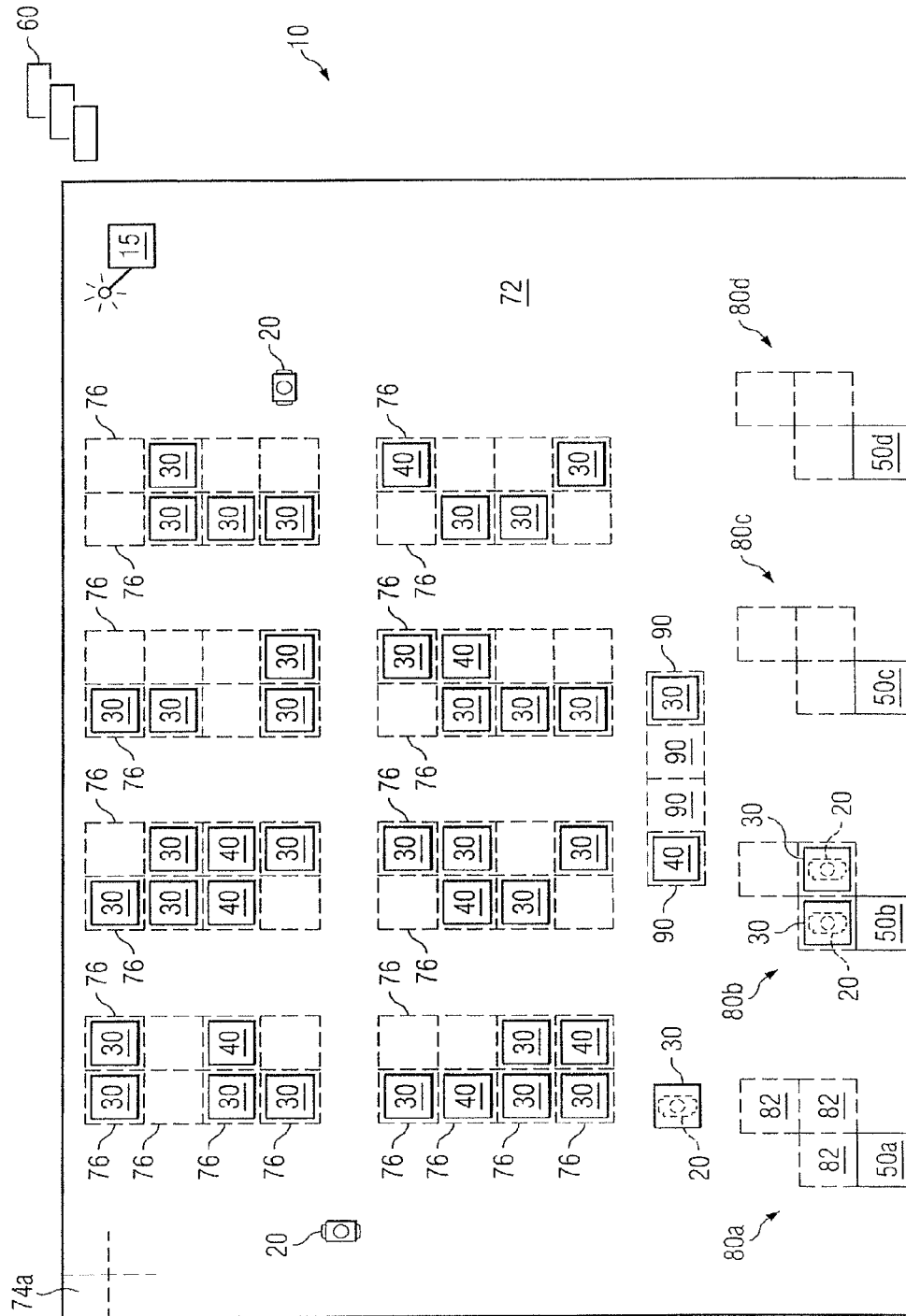


FIG. 2

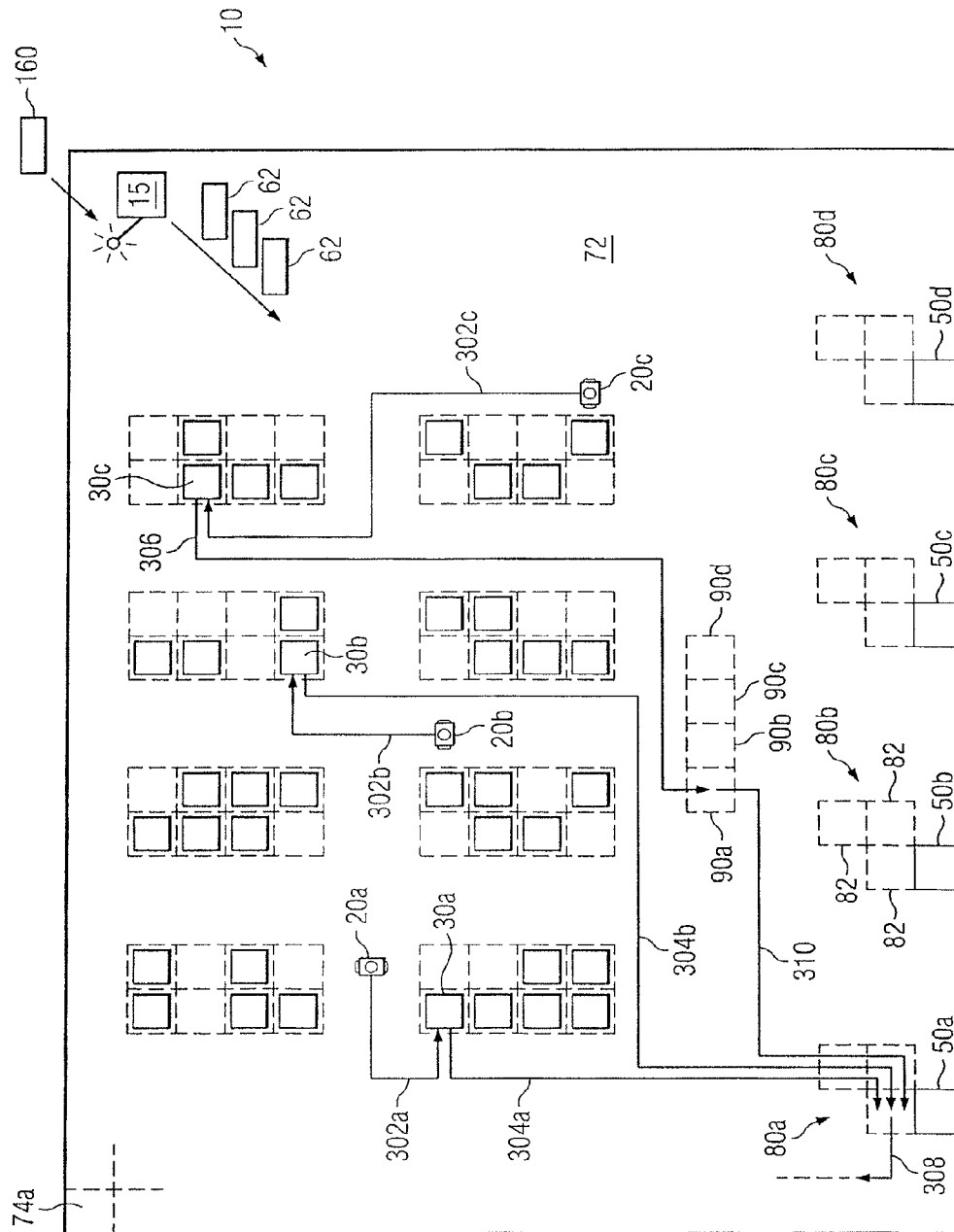


FIG. 3

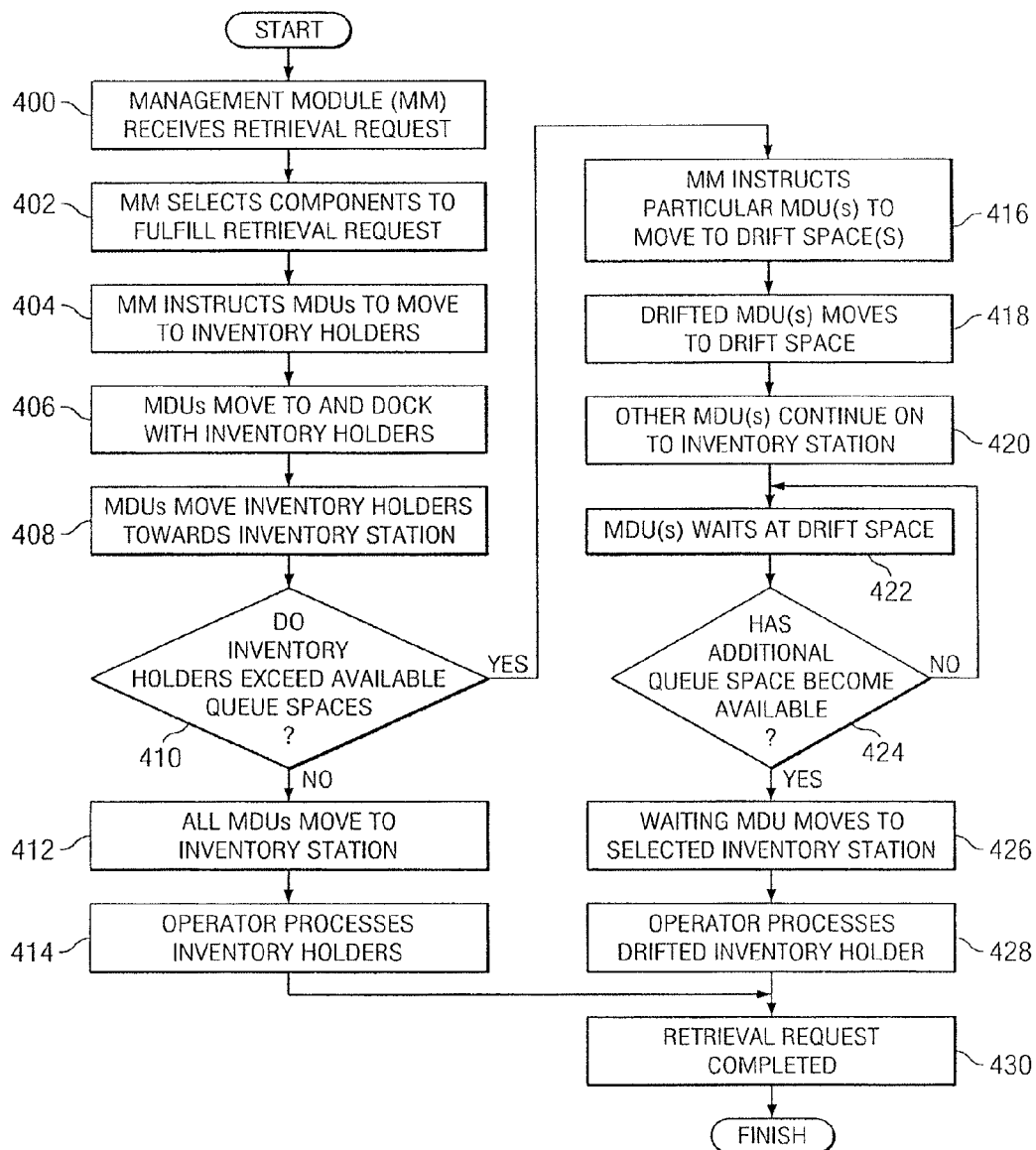
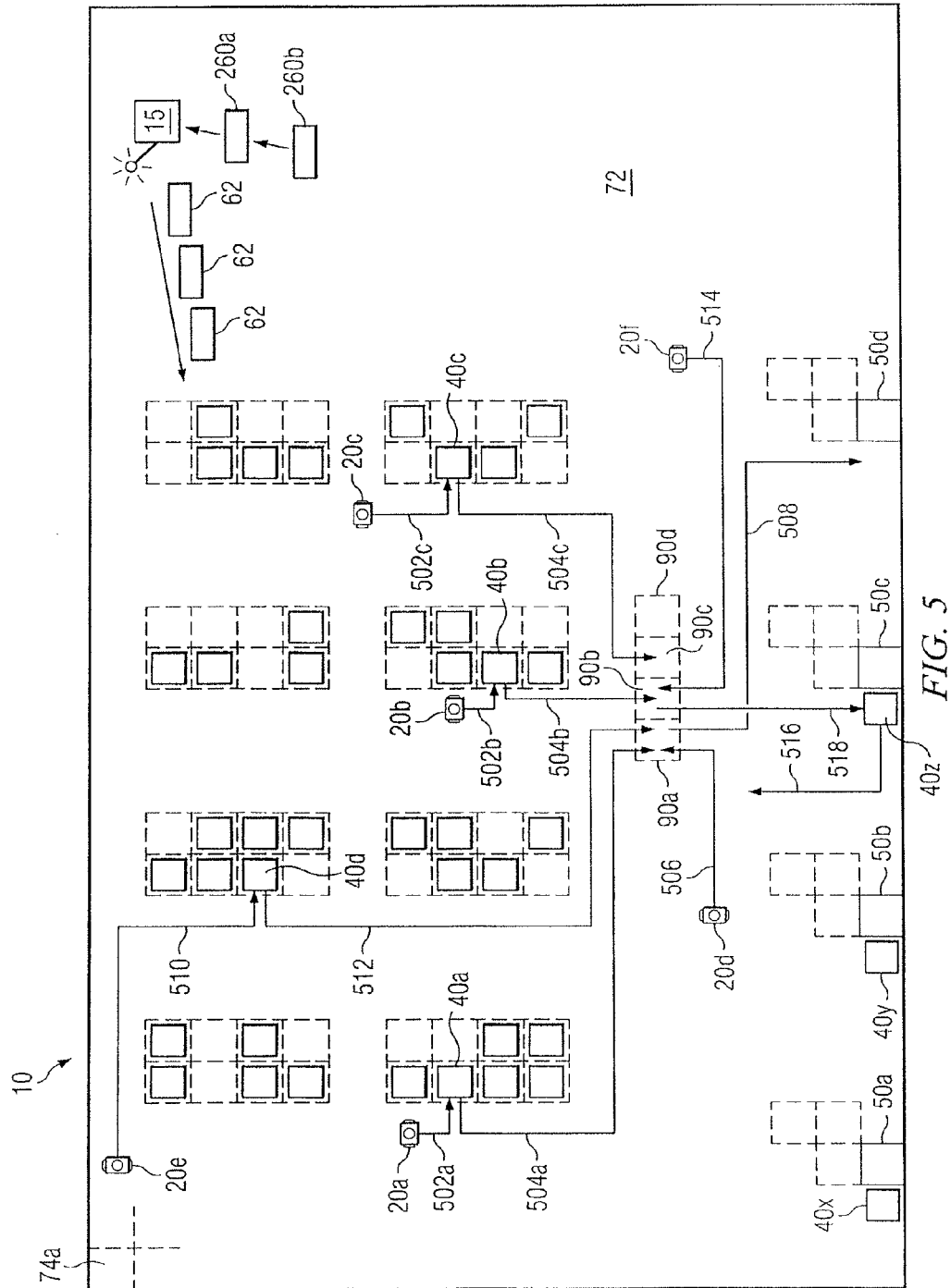


FIG. 4



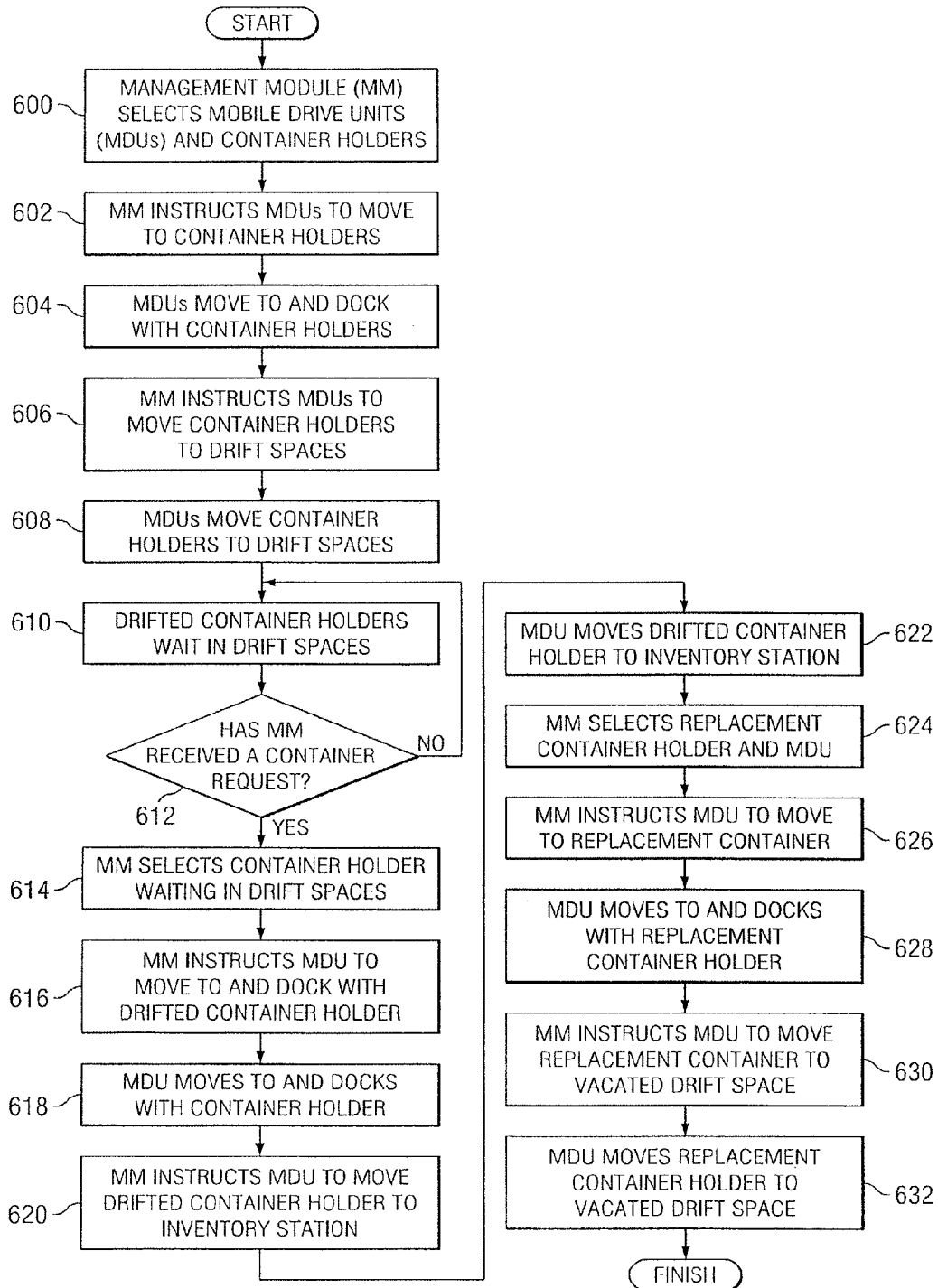


FIG. 6

METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR FULFILLING REQUESTS IN AN INVENTORY SYSTEM

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 13/675,450, filed Nov. 13, 2012, now U.S. Pat. No. 8,626,335, and entitled "Method And System for Fulfilling Requests In An Inventory System," which is a continuation of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 12/413,074, filed Mar. 27, 2009, now U.S. Pat. No. 8,483,869, and entitled "Method And System for Fulfilling Requests In An Inventory System," which is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/185,198, filed Jul. 19, 2005, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,894,932, and entitled "Method and System for Replenishing Inventory Items;" a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/185,957, filed Jul. 19, 2005, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,894,933, and entitled "Method and System for Retrieving Inventory Items;" and a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/185,467, filed Jul. 19, 2005 and entitled "Method and System for Storing Inventory Holders."

TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates in general to inventory systems, and more particularly to a method and system for efficient storage and retrieval of inventory items.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Modern inventory systems, such as those in mail-order warehouses, airport luggage systems, and custom-order manufacturing facilities, face significant challenges in responding to requests for inventory items. In inventory systems tasked with responding to large numbers of diverse orders, slow responses to orders may result in an ever-increasing backlog of inventory requests. Furthermore, in inventory systems encompassing substantial amounts of physical space, response times may depend heavily on the location of inventory items and resources to be used in fulfilling a received order. As a result, efficient use of time, space, and system resources can be crucial to successful operation and management of an inventory system.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the present invention, the disadvantages and problems associated inventory storage have been substantially reduced or eliminated. In particular, a mobile inventory system is provided that includes one or more mobile drive units capable of moving components between locations within a physical space associated with the mobile inventory system for purposes of completing tasks relating to inventory items.

In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, a method for fulfilling requests within an inventory system includes receiving a request indicating an activity to be completed. The method also includes selecting a holder to fulfill the request and an inventory station at which to fulfill the request. The inventory station is associated with a queue that includes a plurality of queue spaces. The method further includes moving the selected holder from a first location to a second location remote from the selected inventory station. Additionally, the method also includes determining that a trigger event has occurred and, in response to determining that the trigger event has occurred, moving the selected holder

from the second location to a queue space of a queue associated with the selected inventory station.

In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, a system for fulfilling requests within an inventory system includes a plurality of holders, a plurality of inventory stations, and a management module. The inventory holders are capable of storing objects. Inventory items may be removed from the inventory holders at the inventory stations, and each inventory station is associated with a queue comprising a plurality of queue spaces. The management module is capable of receiving a request indicating an activity to be completed and selecting a holder to fulfill the request. The management module is also capable of selecting an inventory station at which to fulfill the request and instructing a mobile drive unit to move the selected holder from a first location to a second location remote from the selected inventory station. Additionally, the management module is capable of determining that a trigger event has occurred, and in response to determining that the trigger event has occurred, instructing the mobile drive unit to move the selected holder from the second location to a queue space of a queue associated with the selected inventory station.

Technical advantages of certain embodiments of the present invention include the ability to optimize use of space and system resources in completing tasks and minimizing task-completion times. Further technical advantages of certain embodiments of the present invention include providing a flexible and scalable inventory storage solution that can be easily adapted to accommodate system growth and modification. Other technical advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to one skilled in the art from the following figures, descriptions, and claims. Moreover, while specific advantages have been enumerated above, various embodiments may include all, some, or none of the enumerated advantages.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

For a more complete understanding of the present invention and its advantages, reference is now made to the following description, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, in which:

FIG. 1 illustrates components of an inventory system according to a particular embodiment;

FIG. 2 is an overhead view of a particular embodiment of the inventory system illustrated in FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 illustrates example operation of a particular embodiment of the inventory system while completing certain tasks;

FIG. 4 is a flowchart detailing the steps completed by certain embodiments of the inventory system in executing the example operation illustrated in FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 illustrates example operation of a particular embodiment of the inventory system while completing other tasks;

FIG. 6 is a flowchart detailing the steps completed by certain embodiments of the inventory system in executing the example operation illustrated in FIG. 5.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

FIG. 1 illustrates an inventory system 10 according to a particular embodiment of the present invention. Inventory system 10 includes a management module 15, one or more mobile drive units 20, one or more inventory holders 30, one or more container holders 40, and one or more inventory stations 50. In response to commands communicated by man-

agement module **15**, mobile drive units **20** transport inventory holders **30** and container holders **40** within a physical area associated with inventory system **10** for purposes of fulfilling orders received by inventory system **10**. In particular embodiments, the fulfillment of a particular order may involve the completion of several tasks by inventory system **10** and reducing the time that inventory system **10** spends completing such tasks can improve system throughput. Additionally, in particular embodiments, effective use of the finite physical area available for use by the various components of inventory system **10** can lead to greater system efficiency. As a result, particular embodiments of inventory system **10** may utilize certain techniques to anticipate tasks to be completed by certain components and to position the relevant components so as to reduce the time required to complete the anticipated tasks. Furthermore, certain techniques may be implemented to relieve congestion caused by less sophisticated techniques for positioning these elements. In particular, inventory system **10** may utilize a technique (referred to herein as “drifting”) to move components to designated destinations in anticipation of tasks to be completed involving the drifted components.

Management module **15** receives and/or generates requests that initiate particular operations involving mobile drive units **20**, inventory holders **30**, inventory items **32**, container holders **40**, containers **42**, inventory stations **50**, and/or other elements of inventory system **10**. Management module **15** may select components of inventory system **10** to perform these operations and communicate commands, instructions, and/or other appropriate information to the selected components to facilitate completion of these operations. Although the description below focuses on embodiments of inventory system **10** that receive requests (such as operation requests **60** illustrated in FIG. 1) from other components of inventory system **10**, management module **15** may alternatively or additionally generate such requests itself using any appropriate techniques.

Additionally, management module **15** may represent a single component, multiple components located at a central location within inventory system **10**, and/or multiple components distributed throughout inventory system **10**. For example, management module **15** may represent components of one or more mobile drive units **20** that are capable of communicating information between the mobile drive units **20** and coordinating movement of mobile drive units **20** in transporting inventory holders **30**. In general, management module **15** may include any appropriate combination of hardware and/or software suitable to provide the described functionality and may further include components located on mobile drive units **20**, inventory stations **50**, or other elements of inventory system **10**.

Mobile drive units **20** move inventory holders **30** between locations within a workspace associated with inventory system **10**. Mobile drive units **20** may represent any devices or components appropriate for use in inventory system **10** based on the characteristics and configuration of inventory holders **30** and/or other elements of inventory system **10**. In a particular embodiment of inventory system **10**, mobile drive units **20** represent independent, self-powered devices configured to freely move about the associated workspace. In alternative embodiments, mobile drive units **20** represent elements of a tracked inventory system **10** configured to move inventory holder **30** along tracks, rails, cables, or other guidance elements traversing the associated workspace. In such an embodiment, mobile drive units **20** may receive power through a connection to the guidance elements, such as a powered rail.

Additionally, mobile drive units **20** may be capable of communicating with management module **15** to receive information identifying selected inventory holders **30**, transmit locations of mobile drive units **20**, or exchange any other suitable information used by management module **15** or mobile drive units **20** during operation. Mobile drive units **20** may communicate with management module **15** wirelessly, using wired connections between mobile drive units **20** and management module **15**, and/or in any other appropriate manner. As one example, particular embodiments of mobile drive unit **20** may communicate with management module **15** and/or with one another using 802.11, Bluetooth, or any other appropriate wireless communication protocol. As another example, in a tracked inventory system **10**, tracks or other guidance element upon which mobile drive units **20** move may be wired to facilitate communication between mobile drive units **20** and other components of inventory system **10**.

Furthermore, as noted above, management module **15** may include components of individual mobile drive units **20**. Thus, for the purposes of this description, communication between management module **15** and a particular mobile drive unit **20** may represent communication between components of a particular mobile drive unit **20**. In general, mobile drive units **20** may be powered, controlled, and propelled in any manner appropriate based on the configuration and characteristics of inventory system **10**.

Inventory holders **30** store inventory items **32**. In a particular embodiment, inventory holders **30** include multiple storage bins with each storage bin capable of holding a different type of inventory item **32**. Inventory holders **30** are capable of being carried, rolled, or otherwise moved by mobile drive units **20**. In particular embodiments, inventory holder **30** may provide additional propulsion to supplement that provided by mobile drive unit **20** when moving inventory holder **30**. Additionally, in particular embodiments, each inventory holder **30** may have a plurality of faces, and each bin may be accessible only through specific faces of the relevant inventory holder **30**. Mobile drive units **20** may be configured to rotate inventory holders **30** at appropriate times to present particular faces of inventory holders **30** and the associated bins to an operator or other components of inventory system **10**.

Inventory items **32** represent any objects suitable for storage, retrieval, and/or processing in an automated inventory system **10**. For the purposes of this description, “inventory items” may represent any one or more objects of a particular type that are stored in inventory system **10**. As one example, inventory system **10** may represent a mail order warehouse facility, and inventory items may represent merchandise stored in the warehouse facility. During operation, mobile drive units **20** may retrieve inventory holders **30** containing one or more inventory items requested in an order to be packed for delivery to a customer. Moreover, in particular embodiments of inventory system **10**, boxes containing completed orders may themselves represent inventory items.

As another example, inventory system **10** may represent a merchandise-return facility. In such an embodiment, inventory items may represent merchandise returned by customers. Units of these inventory items may be stored in inventory holders **30** when received at the facility. At appropriate times, a large number of units may be removed from a particular inventory holder **30** and packed for shipment back to a warehouse or other facility.

As yet another example, inventory system **10** may represent a manufacturing facility with inventory items **32** representing individual components of a manufacturing kit to be included in an assembled product, such as electronic components for a customized computer system. In such an embodi-

ment, inventory system 10 may retrieve particular components identified by a specification associated with an order for the product so that a customized version of the product can be built. Although a number of example embodiments are described, inventory system 10 may, in general, represent any suitable facility or system for storing and processing inventory items. Similarly, inventory items 32 may represent objects of any type suitable for storage, retrieval, and/or processing in a particular inventory system 10.

In particular embodiments, inventory system 10 may also include container holders 40 that hold containers 42 in which inventory items 32 may be grouped for various tasks completed in such embodiments of inventory system 10. In a given embodiment, container holders 40 may have any appropriate structure and be configured to store containers 42 in any suitable manner based on the type of containers 42 utilized in inventory system 10 or any other appropriate factors. For example, in particular embodiments, container holders 40 include one or more platform or shelves on which containers 42 rest. As another example, in particular embodiments, container holders 40 include a plurality of bins each holding containers 42 of a different size or type.

Additionally, in particular embodiments, container holders 40 may be substantially similar or identical to inventory holders 30. Certain embodiments of inventory system 10 may include general-purpose holders that can be used as both inventory holders 30 and container holders 40. For example, in particular embodiments, inventory system 10 may include a number of holders that may be dynamically designated as an inventory holder 30 or a container holder 40 depending on whether inventory items 32 or containers 42 are stored on the relevant holder at that particular time. Moreover, in particular embodiments, holders may be configured to simultaneously store both inventory items 32 and containers 42 and a particular holder may, at a particular point in time, represent both an inventory holder 30 and a container holder 40.

Containers 42 represent any appropriate form of container into or onto which inventory items 32 can be placed for storage, shipping, or other appropriate purposes. Examples of containers 42 include, but are not limited to, boxes, pallets, bins, cartons, and envelopes. In particular embodiments, containers 42 are independent of the container holders 40 in which containers 42 are stored, and as a result, containers 42 may be removed from container holders 40 for processing or transferred to other container holders 40. As one example, containers 42 may represent boxes in which or pallets on which inventory items 32 associated with a particular order may be stored for delivery, and the relevant container 42 may then be shipped to a customer associated with that order. As another example, containers 42 may represent bins or other containers in which inventory items 32 may be placed for long term storage and then moved to a special location or removed from inventory system 10.

Inventory stations 50 represent locations designated for the removal of inventory items 32 from inventory holders 30, the introduction of inventory items 32 into inventory holders 30, the transfer of inventory items 32 to containers 42, and/or the processing or handling of inventory items 32 in any other suitable manner. Inventory stations 50 may also represent any appropriate components for processing or handling inventory items 32, such as scanners for monitoring the flow of inventory items 32 in and out of inventory system 10, communication interfaces for communicating with management module 15, and/or any other suitable components. Inventory stations 50 may be controlled, entirely or in part, by human operators or may be fully automated. Moreover, the human or automated operators of inventory stations 50 may be capable of

performing certain tasks to inventory items 32, such as packing or counting inventory items 32, as part of the operation of inventory system 10.

Although “inventory station” as used in the following description refers to locations at which any appropriate processing operation supported by inventory system 10 may be completed, particular embodiments of inventory system 10 may include specialized inventory stations 50 suitable for performing only a single processing task supported by inventory system 10. Moreover, a particular embodiment of inventory system 10 may include inventory stations 50 that are, in general, capable of handling multiple types of operation requests 60 but, at any given time, configured to handle only one particular type of operation requests 60.

FIG. 2 is an overhead view of a particular embodiment of inventory system 10 illustrating example operation of the relevant embodiment. In FIG. 2, the elements described above with respect to FIG. 1 are located within a workspace 70. Workspace 70 represents an area associated with inventory system 10 in which mobile drive units 20 can move and/or inventory holders 30 can be stored. For example, workspace 70 may represent all or part of the floor of a mail-order warehouse in which inventory system 10 operates. Although FIG. 2 shows, for the purposes of illustration, an embodiment of inventory system 10 in which workspace 70 includes a fixed, predetermined, and finite physical space, particular embodiments of inventory system 10 may include mobile drive units 20 and inventory holders 30 that are configured to operate within a workspace 70 that is of variable dimensions and/or arbitrary geometry.

Additionally, in certain embodiments, workspace 70 may be associated with a grid, tessellation, tiling, or other appropriate division of area to facilitate the use of space resources within inventory system 10 by the various elements of inventory system 10. The illustrated embodiment of FIG. 2 utilizes a grid that divides workspace 70 into a plurality of spaces that are each associated with a particular area of workspace 70 and referred to generically in this description as a “space 74.” FIG. 2, for purposes of simplicity, illustrates a single space 74 (shown as “space 74a”), but for purposes of this description it is assumed that a grid divides the entirety of workspace 70 into spaces 74 and other types of spaces, as described further below.

In particular embodiments, various areas within inventory system 10 may be designated for, dedicated to, or otherwise associated with certain activities or uses.

As one example, the embodiment of inventory system 10 in FIG. 2 includes a plurality of storage spaces 76, which represent physical locations where components of inventory system 10 can rest when not being used by inventory system 10 to complete tasks. For example, in particular embodiments, inventory holders 30 and/or container holders 40 may be stored in storage spaces 76 when not being used to fulfill orders. Spaces 74 may be statically designated as storage spaces 76 or may be designated as storage spaces 74 during operation depending on the needs or priorities of inventory system 10.

As another example, the embodiment of inventory system 10 illustrated in FIG. 2 includes a plurality of inventory stations 50 that are each associated with a queue 80 into which components may, under certain circumstances, move or be placed to await processing upon arrival at inventory stations 50. Each queue 80 provides an area for one or more mobile drive units 20, inventory holders 30, container holders 40, and/or other components to rest until the associated inventory station 50 is ready to process a request or perform other tasks associated with the relevant component. In particular

embodiments, queues **80** are each associated with a particular physical area of inventory system **10**. For example, in the illustrated embodiment, queues **80** are each associated with a plurality of queue spaces **82** in which mobile drive units **20**, inventory holders **30**, container holders **40**, or other components may wait while stored in the corresponding queue **80**. In particular embodiments, a particular queue **80** may be statically associated with a fixed group of queue spaces **82**. In alternative embodiments, a particular queue **80** may be associated with a dynamically-assigned group of queue spaces **82** determined based on the type of tasks to be completed at the associated inventory station **50**, a traffic metric for the associated inventory station **50**, and/or any other appropriate factors.

As yet another example, the embodiment of inventory system **10** illustrated in FIG. 1, includes a plurality of drift spaces **90**. Drift spaces **90** each represent an area of workspace **70** utilized by inventory system **10** to allow components of inventory system **10**, during the completion of a particular task involving that element, to move towards a particular destination or otherwise be positioned so as to reduce a travel time to the relevant destination. In particular embodiments, the relevant element may remain in a particular drift space **90** or a particular group of drift spaces **90** until a trigger event (or events) occurs. After the trigger event occurs, the element may then move toward the relevant system resource for completion of the task. In particular embodiments, spaces **74** may be statically designated as drift spaces **90**, while in alternative embodiments, spaces **74** may be dynamically designated as drift spaces **90** depending on the resource needs of inventory system **10**, the availability of spaces **74**, and/or other appropriate considerations. As described further below, drift spaces **90** may be utilized in various ways to improve throughput or otherwise increase system efficiency of certain embodiments of inventory system **10**.

When functioning, the various components of inventory system **10** complete certain operations involving inventory items **32** and/or the components of inventory system **10** themselves. Management module **15** manages the operation of components and the use of various system resources to facilitate the fulfillment of these tasks. Although the description below focuses on an embodiment of inventory system **10** capable of performing specific operations, a particular embodiment of inventory system **10** may be configured to perform any appropriate operations associated with the storage, processing, transport, or removal of inventory items **32**.

Management module **15** receives operation requests **60** requesting the completion of certain operations associated with inventory items **32**. For example, in particular embodiments, management module **15** receives operation requests **60** requesting the packaging and shipment of selected inventory items **32**. Additionally, in the illustrated embodiment, management module **15** receives or generates operation requests **60** relating to the maintenance and upkeep of inventory system **10**. For example, in particular embodiments, management module **15** receives or generates operation requests **60** related to restocking inventory items **32**, recharging mobile drive units **20**, delivering empty containers **42** to inventory stations **50**, and/or other suitable tasks that allow various components of inventory system **10** to respond to or be utilized in fulfilling orders. Operation requests **60** may represent communication of any form suitable for inventory system **10** and may include any appropriate information identifying inventory items **32**, components or resources of inventory system **10**, and/or specific operations to be completed.

As noted above, management module **15** may receive operation requests **60** from a human operator or other com-

ponents of inventory system **10**. For example, an operator of inventory system **10** may manually enter operation requests **60** using a keyboard coupled to management module **15**. As another example, management module **15** may receive operation requests **60** from remote components over a network connection, such as an Internet connection. Alternatively, management module **15** may itself generate operation requests **60**. For example, management module **15** may be configured to initiate a particular operation based on a predetermined schedule or in response to a particular event and may generate operation requests **60** accordingly. In general, management module **15** may receive or generate operation requests **60** in any suitable manner.

In response to receiving or generating an operation request **60**, management module **15** may select components or other elements of inventory system **10** to complete the operation request **60**. Depending on the type of operation requested, management module **15** may select a particular mobile drive unit **20**, inventory holder **30**, container holder **40**, inventory station **50**, and/or other suitable components and elements of inventory system **10** to facilitate completion of the relevant operation request **60**. Management module **15** may select the specific components for completing a particular operation request **60** based on any appropriate considerations. As one example, management module **15** may, in particular embodiments, select a particular inventory holder **30** to complete an operation based on factors including, but not limited to, its current distance from one or more mobile drive units **20**, the various types of inventory items **32** stored by the selected inventory holder **30**, its current location within workspace **70**, and/or other operation requests **60** the selected inventory holder **30** is currently being used to fulfill. As another example, management module **15** may, in particular embodiments, select a mobile drive unit **20** to fulfill a particular task based on factors including, but not limited to, its distance from a selected inventory holder **30**, a power supply level associated with the selected mobile drive unit **20**, and/or its current activity. More generally, however, management module **15** may select suitable components to complete tasks associated with a particular operation request **60** based on any appropriate factors, considerations, or criteria.

After management module **15** selects suitable components and/or elements to complete operation request **60**, management module **15** may then communicate information to the selected components indicating tasks to be completed by these components or their operators and/or identifying one or more of the other selected components involved in completion of the requested operation. For example, in the illustrated embodiment, management module **15** communicates task requests **62** to selected components to communicate information regarding tasks to be completed by the receiving components and/or other components to be involved in completing the relevant tasks. Task requests **62** may represent communication of any suitable form to initiate completion of tasks by the receiving components, such as instructions, commands, and/or requests appropriately formatted for the receiving components.

The selected components may then utilize the received information to complete tasks associated with the relevant operation request **60**. For example, based on instructions received from management module **15**, a selected mobile drive unit **20** may move a selected inventory holder **30** to a selected inventory station **50** so that an operator of the selected inventory station **50** may pick requested inventory items **32** from the selected inventory holder **30** and pack them for shipment. Similarly, an operator of an inventory station **50** may receive information from management module **15** iden-

tifying inventory items **32** to be selected from an inventory holder **30** moved to the relevant inventory station **50** and packed in a container **42** as part of fulfilling an operation request **60** received by management module **15**.

Because, in particular embodiments, the operation of inventory system **10** is constrained by limits on space, system components, and/or other resources, the efficient use of such resources may increase the throughput and efficiency of inventory system **10**. As a result, in particular embodiments, management module **15** may employ various techniques to progressively move, or “drift,” inventory holders **30**, container holders **40**, or other components of inventory system **10** towards inventory stations **50**, other system resources, or other destinations within workspace **70**. By moving the relevant component towards its destination in stages, management module **15** may be able to time its arrival in a manner that results in more efficient use of space and system resources.

To facilitate this drifting, certain areas within workspace **70** may be designated as drift spaces **90**, where components can wait until an appropriate event has occurred triggering further movement of the component, either to another intermediate location or a final destination. Drift spaces **90** may represent any appropriately sized and shaped area of workspace **70** and may be located at any suitable location within workspace **70**. Additionally, as noted above, drift spaces **90** may represent fixed, predetermined locations within workspace **70** or may represent a dynamically allocated areas of workspace **70** that may be selected and designated as appropriate during operation of inventory system **10**.

Drift spaces **90** may be used by management module **15** in any appropriate manner in completing the tasks associated with operation requests **60**. For example, in particular embodiments, management module **15** may park a component destined for a particular system resource, such as an inventory station **50**, in a drift space **90** until certain conditions are satisfied (e.g., the resource becomes available for use by the component or the number of other components waiting in the vicinity of the system resource falls below some maximum threshold). This may allow management module **15** to limit congestion in the vicinity of the system resource but also allow management module **15** to reduce the completion time of the relevant operation by positioning the relevant component closer to the system resource while the component waits for the system resource.

Additionally, the use of drift spaces **90** may allow a system component to be positioned close to multiple different instances of a particular system resource and move to the first instance that becomes available. For example, a component may be moved to a drift space **90** removed from all active inventory stations **50** but in relatively close proximity to these inventory stations **50**. The component may then wait in its drift space **90** until an inventory station **50** needs the component or an inventory station **50** becomes available to complete a task involving that component. Because the component is moved to an appropriate drift space **90** prior to an inventory station **50** becoming available or needing the component, the component can be quickly repositioned at any of the inventory stations **50** as soon as appropriate.

Furthermore, in certain embodiments, a particular drift space **90** may be designated exclusively for drifting particular types of components, drifting components associated with a particular trigger event, drifting components for a particular purpose, and/or drifting components destined for a particular location. For example, a first drift space **90** may be designated as a waiting place for inventory holders **30** responding to specific retrieval requests **160**, while a second drift space **90**

may be designated as a waiting place for container holders **40** waiting for a container request **260** to fulfill. Depending on the configuration of inventory system **10**, such exclusive drift spaces **90** may be designated when inventory system **10** begins operation or at any appropriate time during operation.

Alternatively, a particular drift space **90** may be designated for use for any type of drifting, and drift spaces **90** may be used interchangeably by components of inventory system **10**. For example, in particular embodiments, a particular drift space **90** may be used, at different times, as a waiting place for both inventory holders **30** and container holders **40** en route to various different locations. Furthermore, in certain embodiments, a type of a particular drift space **90** may be designated dynamically during operation of inventory system **10**.

As a result, drift spaces **90** may be used in many different ways to provide improved efficiency and throughput in inventory system **10**. Additionally, in particular embodiments, drift spaces **90** may be used flexibly to dynamically optimize the effectiveness of inventory system **10**. Consequently, the use of drift spaces **90** may provide numerous benefits in inventory system **10**. Specific embodiments, however, may provide some, none, or all of these benefits.

FIGS. 3-6 provide specific examples of how drift spaces **90** may be used in particular embodiments of inventory system **10** in fulfilling particular types of operation requests **60**. As explained further below, in particular embodiments, the use of drift spaces **90** may limit congestion, reduce task-completion times, and/or otherwise improve system efficiency or throughput. As a result, certain embodiments of inventory system **10** may provide a number of operational benefits. Specific embodiments may, however, provide some, none, or all of these benefits.

FIGS. 3 and 4 illustrate one example of how drift spaces **90** can be used in particular embodiments of inventory system **10** to improve system efficiency in responding to particular types of operation requests **60**. In particular, FIGS. 3 and 4 describe the operation of certain embodiments of inventory system **10** in responding to a particular type of operation request **60** (referred to here as a “retrieval request **160**”) that identifies one or more inventory items **32** to be retrieved from storage in inventory system **10**. In response to receiving retrieval request **160**, management module **15** instructs mobile drive units **20** to transport inventory holders **30** storing inventory items **32** requested by retrieval request **160** to a particular inventory station **50** so that the requested inventory items **32** can be collected and prepared for shipping. If several inventory holders **30** are involved in fulfilling retrieval request **160**, management module **15** may utilize drift spaces **90** to position one or more of these inventory holders **30** close to the relevant inventory station **50** and then move them to that inventory station **50** as space becomes available nearby. Thus, as explained further below, drift spaces **90** may allow management module **15** to limit the number of inventory holders **30** that are placed in the vicinity of the relevant inventory station **50** while at the same time reducing the lengthy wait time that could result if additional inventory holders **30** had to be retrieved from their original storage spaces **76** when inventory station **50** was ready to process these inventory holders **30**.

FIG. 3 illustrates an overhead view of a particular embodiment of inventory system **10** in fulfilling an example retrieval request **160**. As noted above, retrieval request **160** is an operation request **60** that identifies one or more types of inventory items **32** to be retrieved from storage in inventory system **10**. In particular embodiments, retrieval request **160** may represent a customer order received by inventory system **10** and may identify one or more inventory items **32** to be packaged

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and shipped to the ordering customer. Inventory items 32 ordered by the customer may be retrieved from inventory holders 30 at an inventory station 50 and packaged for shipping (e.g., in a container 42) or otherwise processed in accordance with the retrieval request 160.

In the illustrated example, management module 15 responds to retrieval request 160 by selecting an inventory station 50, one or more inventory holders 30, and one or more mobile drive units 20 to fulfill retrieval request 160. As noted above, management module 15 may select these components based on any appropriate considerations. FIG. 3 illustrates an example in which management module 15 selects three mobile drive units 20 (shown as mobile drive units 20a, 20b, and 20c) three inventory holders 30 (shown as inventory holders 30a, 30b, and 30c) to fulfill retrieval request 160 at a selected inventory station (shown as inventory station 50a).

After selecting the relevant components, management module 15 may communicate one or more task requests 62 to each of the selected mobile drive units 20 to facilitate transport of the selected inventory holders 30 to the selected inventory station 50. The task requests 62 transmitted to each mobile drive unit 20 identify a selected inventory holder 30 in terms of its location or an identifier associated with the selected inventory holder 30. The selected mobile drive units 20 then move to the selected inventory holders 30 (as shown by arrows 302a-c in FIG. 3) and dock with them. After docking, the selected mobile drive units 20 begin moving the selected inventory holders 30 towards the selected inventory station 50.

Depending on the number of inventory holders 30 selected to fulfill retrieval request 160, the size of a queue associated with the selected inventory station 50, and/or other appropriate considerations, management module 15 may instruct one or more mobile drive units 20 to temporarily move their associated inventory holder 30 to a drift space 90. For example, in the illustrated embodiment, management module 15 is configured to drift one or more inventory holders 30 destined for a particular inventory station 50 when the number of inventory holders 30 en route to that inventory station 50 is greater than two. As a result, in the illustrated example, management module 15 drifts one of the selected inventory holders 30a-c instead of moving the relevant inventory holder 30 directly to inventory station 50a.

Furthermore, if management module 15 decides, in responding to retrieval request 160, to drift one or more inventory holders 30, management module 15 may select the inventory holder 30 or inventory holders 30 to drift based on any suitable criteria or consideration. For example, management module 15 may select inventory holders 30 to drift based on the distance between the drifted inventory holders 30 and the selected inventory station 50, the inventory items 32 stored by the drifted inventory holders 30 (e.g., to allow retrieved inventory items 32 to be packaged in a particular order in a container 42), the time required for the corresponding mobile drive unit 20 to transport the drifted inventory holders 30 to the selected inventory station 50, and/or any other appropriate considerations or criteria.

The mobile drive units 20 associated with inventory holders 30 to be drifted, then move the drifted inventory holders 30 to one of drift spaces 90, while the remaining mobile drive units 20 move their corresponding inventory holders 30 to the selected inventory station 50. In particular embodiments, management module 15 may select a particular drift space 90 for each drifted inventory holder 30. For example, in particular embodiments, management module 15 selects an appropriate drift space 90 for each drifted inventory holder 30 from a list of currently-available drift spaces 90 and communicates

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a task request 62 identifying the selected drift space 90 and/or its locations to the mobile drive unit 20 docked to the drifted inventory holders 30. Alternatively, in particular embodiments, mobile drive units 20 may themselves determine the drift spaces 90 that are available and select a particular drift space 90 from among the available drift spaces 90. Thus, in the illustrated example, mobile drive units 20a and 20b move their respective inventory holders 30 to inventory station 50a (as shown by arrows 304a and 304b). Additionally, management module 15 selects drift space 90a for inventory holder 30c and instructs mobile drive unit 20c to move inventory holder 30c to drift space 90a. Mobile drive unit 20c then moves to drift space 90a (as shown by arrow 306).

The drifted inventory holders 30 then wait in drift spaces 90 until one or more trigger events occur. These trigger events may represent any suitable events associated with the drifted inventory holders 30, the selected inventory station 50, any other component of inventory station 50, and/or any aspect of the operation of inventory system 10. For example, in particular embodiments, the trigger events may be selected, in part, to limit the number of inventory holders 30 that are moved into the vicinity of the selected inventory station 50 at any given time. Thus, in such embodiments, the trigger events may relate to or involve the expiration of a delay period, an indication from the selected inventory station 50 (or an operator of the selected inventory station 50) that a certain number of the selected inventory holders 30 have been processed, or any other occurrence that indicates or suggests a certain number of the selected inventory holders 30 have been or should have been moved out of the vicinity of the selected inventory station 50.

Furthermore, in particular embodiments, a particular inventory holder 30 may wait in drift spaces 90 until multiple trigger events occur. For example, in certain embodiments, a particular drifted inventory holder 30 may wait in a drift space 90 until one or more other drifted inventory holders 30 move towards their final destinations and some other trigger event occurs. This may allow drifted inventory holders 30 to depart from drift spaces 90 in a particular order, based on a time of arrival, a priority level, and/or other factors. Furthermore, different inventory holders 30 may be associated with different trigger events. Consequently, in particular embodiments, all drifted inventory holders 30 in drift spaces 90 may wait for the same trigger event or events, and their corresponding mobile drive units 20 may move them to their destination when the trigger event or events occur. In other embodiments or under other circumstances, different inventory holders 30 may be associated with different trigger events, with each drifted inventory holder 30 waiting in a drift space 90 until the trigger event associated with that particular drifted inventory holder 30 occurs.

Depending on the configuration and capabilities of management module 15 and mobile drive units 20, management module 15 may notify a mobile drive unit 20 associated with a particular drifted inventory holder 30 that the trigger event associated with that inventory holder 30 has occurred, the mobile drive unit 20 may itself determine that the trigger event has occurred, or both components may be configured to detect some or all of the trigger events occurring in inventory system 10. Additionally, in particular embodiments, the trigger event may represent receipt, by the relevant mobile drive unit 20, of instructions (e.g., task requests 62) from management module 15 or another element of inventory system 10 instructing that mobile drive unit 20 to move an inventory holder 30 from a drift space 90 in which it is waiting to another destination.

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Once the trigger event associated with a particular drifted inventory holder **30** has occurred and/or the mobile drive unit **20** transporting that drifted inventory holder **30** has received any appropriate notification of such occurrence, the transporting mobile drive unit **20** moves the relevant inventory holder **30** to its destination. At its destination, the drifted inventory holder **30** is processed in accordance with the retrieval request and inventory items **32** identified by retrieval request **160** are removed from the drifted inventory holder **30**. These inventory items **32** may be combined with inventory items **32** selected from other inventory holders **30** to complete fulfillment of retrieval request **160**.

In the illustrated example, the trigger event associated with drifted inventory holder **30c** is the departure of one or more inventory holders **30** from queue **80a** associated with inventory station **50a**. As a result, when management module **15** determines that mobile drive unit **20a** has exited queue **80a** of inventory station **50** (as shown by arrow **308**), management module **15** transmits a task request **62** to mobile drive unit **20c**, which is waiting in drift space **90a**. In response to this task request **62**, mobile drive unit **20c** moves inventory holder **30c** to inventory station **50a** (as shown by arrow **310**). At inventory station **50a**, inventory items **32** identified by retrieval request **160** are then removed from inventory holder **30c** to complete the fulfillment of retrieval request **160**.

Although FIG. **3** focuses on an example embodiment of inventory system **10** that implements the described techniques in a particular manner, various embodiments may implement the utilized techniques in any appropriate manner. For example, in the described embodiment, a particular mobile drive unit **20** transports each drifted inventory holder **30** or container holder **40** to a drift space **90** and then waits with the drifted holder until the trigger event or events occur. In alternative embodiments, however, mobile drive units **20** may transport drifted inventory holders **30** to drift spaces **90** and leave these drifted inventory holders **30** in drift spaces **90**. Other mobile drive units **20** may then be responsible for moving the drifted inventory holders **30** to their final destination once the trigger event or events occur. Moreover, in particular embodiments, a particular mobile drive unit **20** or group of mobile drive units **20** may be used to move all drifted inventory holders **30** between drift spaces **90** and a final destination of the drifted inventory holders **30** and/or between the various drift spaces **90** to manage the use of drift spaces **90**.

Additionally, as noted above, drift spaces **90** in workspace **70** may, in particular embodiments, be utilized for more than one purpose or may be associated with more than one destination in workspace **70**. Consequently, a particular drift space **90** may, at various different times, be used to drift inventory holders **30** destined for multiple different inventory stations **50**. As a result, in fulfilling a subsequent retrieval request **160**, the process described above may be repeated with a second mobile drive unit **20** destined for a second inventory station **50** waiting in the same drift space **90** for a particular trigger event to occur. Thus, in particular embodiments, drift spaces **90** may be used to flexibly drift mobile drive units **20** and inventory holders **30** destined for different inventory stations **50**.

Furthermore, although the description above describes, for purposes of simplicity, an example in which a final destination is selected for drifted inventory holders **30** before they begin drifting, in alternative embodiments, a final destination for drifted devices may not be chosen until the relevant devices have begun drifting or until after these devices have finished drifting. For example, in particular embodiments, an inventory holder **30** may be selected for fulfilling a received

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order, but the inventory station **50** at which the received order will be fulfilled may not be determined until later. In such embodiments, the determination may be delayed altogether or a group of candidate inventory stations **50** may be selected when the relevant order is received but a specific inventory station **50** from the candidate group may not be selected until a later time. In such embodiments, management module **15** may select an inventory holder **30** or inventory holders **30** to fulfill the received order but determine that certain necessary or beneficial conditions have not been satisfied and may delay selection of a corresponding inventory station **50**.

For example, management module **15** may determine that a container holder **40** on which a particular order will be stored is not yet available. As a result, management module **15** may drift one or more inventory holders **30** associated with the order until the container holder **40** becomes available. Furthermore, to optimize throughput of system **10**, management module **15** may wait to choose the inventory station **50** at which the order will ultimately be completed until the relevant container holder **40** is available. As a result, management module **15** may instruct mobile drive units **20** to retrieve the relevant inventory holders **30** and transport those inventory holders **30** to drift spaces **90**. When an appropriate triggering event occurs (such as a particular order holder **40** becoming available), management module **15** may select an inventory station **50** at which to fulfill the received order and instruct mobile drive units **20** to move the drifted inventory holders **30** to the relevant inventory station **50**. As a result, the use of drift spaces **90** may allow management module **15** to select the optimal inventory station **50** at which to complete the received order based on the state of system **10** when the relevant container holder **40** finally becomes available.

Additionally, in particular embodiments, management module **15** may select a particular inventory holder **30** to fulfill multiple different orders at multiple different inventory stations **50**. In such embodiments, management module **15** may use drift spaces **90** to temporarily store the relevant inventory holder **30** before and during completion of the different orders, so that this inventory holder **30** can be positioned close to the relevant inventory stations **50** while its orders are still being completed. Consequently, in such embodiments, management module **15** may drift a particular inventory holder **30** until one (or a particular one) of the inventory stations **50** fulfilling the multiple orders associated with the drifted inventory holder **30** becomes available. After being transported to the available inventory station **50**, the inventory holder **30** may then be returned to drift spaces **90** until another inventory station **50** completing an order associated with that inventory holder **30** becomes available.

Thus, in general, drift spaces **90** can be used to move inventory holders **30** or other components of inventory system **10** towards their destination without increasing the congestion in the immediate vicinity of the destination. Limiting the congestion around inventory stations **50** and other system resources can improve efficiency and throughput in certain embodiments of inventory system **10**. As a result, particular embodiments of inventory system **10** can provide several operational benefits. Specific embodiments, however, may provide some, all, or none of these benefits.

FIG. **4** is a flowchart illustrating example operation of the embodiment of inventory system **10** shown in FIG. **3**. In particular, FIG. **4** illustrates the operation of inventory system **10** in fulfilling a retrieval request **160** received by management module **15**. The steps illustrated in FIG. **4** may be combined, modified, or deleted where appropriate, and additional steps may also be added to the flowchart. Additionally, the illustrated steps may be performed in any suitable order.

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Operation begins at step 400 in the illustrated example with management module 15 receiving retrieval request 160. As noted above, retrieval request 160 indicates one or more inventory items 32 to be retrieved from inventory system 10. In response to receiving retrieval request 160, management module 15 selects components of inventory system 10 to fulfill retrieval request 160 at step 402. As part of selecting components to fulfill retrieval request 160, management module 15, in the described embodiment, selects one or more inventory holders 30 storing inventory items 32 identified by retrieval request 160, an inventory station 50 at which to fulfill retrieval request 160, and one or more mobile drive units 20 to transport the selected inventory holders 30 to the selected inventory station 50. As discussed above, management module 15 may select these components based on any appropriate criteria or considerations.

At step 404, management module 15 instructs each of the selected mobile drive units 20 to move towards a storage space 76 associated with a particular one of the selected inventory holders 30. In response, the selected mobile drive units 20 each move to the storage space 76 identified to the relevant mobile drive unit 20 and dock with their respective inventory holders 30 at step 406. The selected mobile drive units 20 then begin to move their corresponding inventory holders 30 towards the selected inventory station 50 at step 408.

At any point while fulfilling retrieval request 160, management module 15 may decide, based on any appropriate factors, to drift one or more of the selected inventory holders 30 to limit congestion in the vicinity of the selected inventory station 50, prevent an overflow of the queue 80 associated with the selected inventory station 50, or otherwise improve the efficiency or throughput of inventory system 10. For example, in the illustrated example, management module 15, at step 410, determines whether the number of selected inventory holders 30 exceeds the number of queue spaces 82 available in a queue 80 associated with the selected inventory station 50. The available queue spaces 82 may represent queue spaces 82 in the relevant queue 80 that management module 15 has not already reserved for specific inventory holders 30 destined for the associated inventory station 50, queue spaces 82 not already occupied by inventory holders 30, or queue spaces 82 that are deemed available based on any other suitable criteria. If the number of selected inventory holders 30 does not exceed the number of queue spaces 82 available in the associated queue 80, then operation continues at step 412 with all of the selected mobile drive units 20 continuing on to the selected inventory station 50. At step 414, the selected inventory holders 30 are then processed (e.g., requested inventory items 32 are removed from the selected inventory holders 30) and retrieval request 160 is completed at step 430 as shown in FIG. 4.

If, however, the number of selected inventory holders 30 does exceed the number of queue spaces 82 available in the associated queue 80, then management module 15, according to this example operation, decides to drift one or more inventory holders 30, as shown by steps 416-426 of FIG. 4. Specifically, at step 416, management module 15 instructs a particular mobile drive unit or units 20 to move towards a drift space 90 in workspace 70. At step 418, the relevant mobile drive unit or units 20 move to a drift space 90. Depending on the configuration of inventory system 10, management module 15 may select the drift space 90 to be used or the relevant mobile drive unit 20 may itself choose a particular drift space 90. At step 420, the other mobile drive units 20 transporting inventory holders 30 continue on to the selected inventory station 50 where they are processed.

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The drifted mobile drive unit or units 20 then wait, at step 422, for a trigger event to occur. In the illustrated example, the trigger event relates to one or more queue spaces 82 becoming available in a queue 80 associated with the selected inventory station 50. As a result, management module 15 and/or the drifted mobile drive unit or units 20 monitor the availability of queue spaces 82 in the queue 80 associated with the selected inventory station 50 and detect when an additional queue space 82 becomes available. For example, in particular embodiments, management module 15 may maintain a database in which information on the availability of queue spaces 82 (such as information on granted queue space reservations or location data for inventory holders 30 in workspace 70). In such embodiments, management module 15 may determine based on this information when queue spaces 82 become available and may communicate this information to mobile drive units 20 to allow mobile drive units 20 to determine when queue spaces 82 become available. If the appropriate component determines at step 424 that no additional queue spaces 82 have become available, the waiting mobile drive unit or units 20 continue to wait with operation returning to step 422.

If, instead, the appropriate component determines that an additional queue space 82 has become available, the waiting mobile drive unit 20 or one of the waiting mobile drive units 20 moves to the selected inventory station 50 at step 426. When the released mobile drive unit 20 arrives at the selected inventory station 50, the drifted inventory holder 30 may then be processed at step 428. For example, an operator of the selected inventory station 50 may remove inventory items 32 identified by retrieval request 160 from the drifted inventory holder 30 and place them in a container 42 associated with retrieval request 160. If additional inventory holders 30 remain in drift spaces 90, steps 424-428 may be repeated for each as additional queue spaces 82 become available.

Once all the inventory items 32 requested by retrieval request 160 have been picked from the selected inventory holders 30, the packed container 42 may be shipped and/or fulfillment of retrieval request 160 may otherwise be completed as shown at step 430. Operation of inventory system 10 in fulfilling retrieval request 160 may then end as shown in FIG. 4.

FIGS. 5 and 6 illustrate another example of how drift spaces 90 can be used in particular embodiments of inventory system 10 to improve system efficiency in responding to particular types of operation requests 60. In particular, FIGS. 5 and 6 describe the operation of certain embodiments of inventory system 10 in responding to another type of operation request 60 (referred to here as a "container request 260") that requests delivery of containers 42 to a particular inventory station 50.

More specifically, in particular embodiments of inventory system 10, a container holder 40 may be positioned beside each inventory station 50. As noted above, containers 42 may represent boxes, pallets, or other suitable containers on or in which inventory items 32 may be grouped for storage, shipping, or other purposes. Positioning a container holder 40 next to each inventory station 50 may allow operators of inventory stations 50 to quickly obtain containers 42 when fulfilling retrieval requests 160 or other requests that involve containers 42. Operators can quickly reach into or onto the container holder 40 positioned next to their inventory station 50 whenever a new container 42 is needed. When the supply of containers 42 in the container holder 40 positioned next to an operator's inventory station 50 is exhausted, management module 15 may instruct a mobile drive unit 20 to deliver another container holder 40 having a fresh supply of contain-

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ers to that operator's inventory station 50. As a result, inventory system 10 can ensure that a steady supply of containers 42 are provided to an inventory station 50 without requiring operators to leave inventory stations 50 to retrieve additional containers 42.

Thus, to reduce the delay experienced between use of the final container 42 in or on the container holder 40 positioned next to a particular inventory station 50 and delivery of another container holder 40 stocked with containers 42 to that inventory station 50, inventory system 10 may utilize drift spaces 90 to locate container holders 40 loaded with containers 42 near to inventory stations 50. When inventory system 10 is operational, one or more container holders 40 may be moved from an initial storage space 74 or other location to drift spaces 90 to wait until needed or requested by a particular inventory station 50. Then, when the supply of containers 42 at a particular inventory station 50 is exhausted, a container holder 40 waiting in a drift space 90 may be moved to the relevant inventory station 50. By positioning stocked container holders 40 in drift spaces 90, certain embodiments of inventory system 10 may reduce the amount of time required to deliver a new container holder 40 to depleted inventory stations 50 and increase the number of retrieval requests 160 and/or other operation requests 60 that each inventory station 50 can process over a given period of time.

FIG. 5, in particular, shows an overhead view of a specific embodiment of inventory system 10 in fulfilling an example container request 260. As noted above, container request 260 is an operation request 60 used in certain embodiments of inventory system 10 to request delivery of containers 42 to a particular inventory station 50. In particular embodiments, container request 260 may represent an instruction, message, or notification sent by the relevant inventory station 50 to management module 15 indicating that the supply of containers 42 at the relevant inventory station 50 has been exhausted and/or requesting additional containers 42 be delivered to the relevant inventory station 50. Management module 15 responds to container requests 260 by instructing a mobile drive unit 20 to transport a container holder 40 to the requesting inventory station 50. To limit the amount of time required to deliver another container holder 40 to inventory station 50, management module 15 may select a container holder 40 waiting in a drift space 90 relatively near to inventory stations 50 to fulfill the container request 260.

More specifically, at an appropriate time during operation of inventory system 10, management module 15 may select one or more container holders 40 to drift until management module 15 receives its next container request 260. For example, in particular embodiments, when inventory system 10 initially starts up, management module 15 may select one or more mobile drive units 20 and one or more container holders 40 and instruct a selected mobile drive unit 20 to move a selected container holder 40 to each active inventory station 50. Management module 15 may also have one or more container holders 40 transported to drift spaces 90. Workspace 70 may be configured so that drift spaces 90 are located relatively close to inventory stations 50 and, in particular embodiments, closer than many or all of storage spaces 76. In the illustrated example, inventory stations 50a-c are initially active, and operation begins with container holders 40 (shown in FIG. 5 as container holders 40x-z) positioned next to each inventory station 50 currently active.

While inventory system 10 is positioning container holders 40 near inventory stations 50 or at an appropriate point in time before or after positioning such container holders 40, inventory system 10 may also move one or more container holders 40 to drift spaces 90. For example, management module 15 may select one or more mobile drive units 20 and one or more container holders 40 and instruct the selected mobile drive units 20 to move the selected container holders 40 to drift

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spaces 90. In the illustrated example, management module 15 selects mobile drive units 20a-c and container holders 40a-c and instructs mobile drive units 20a-c to move container holders 40a-c to drift spaces 90a-c, respectively (as shown by arrows 502a-c and 504a-c). In particular embodiments, the selected mobile drive units 20 may then undock from the drifted container holders 40 and move away to begin completing other tasks.

Once the selected mobile drive units 20 and container holders 40 are positioned in drift spaces 90, inventory system 10 can begin to respond to container requests 260 using container holders 40 waiting in drift spaces 90. As noted above, container requests 260 request delivery of additional containers 42 to a particular inventory station 50. Depending on the configuration of inventory system 10, container requests 260 may be transmitted by an inventory station 50 (or its operator) when the requesting inventory station 50 becomes active, the supply of containers 42 at the requesting inventory station 50 is exhausted, and/or any other event occurs prompting a need for additional containers at the requesting inventory station 50. In the illustrated example, after mobile drive units 20a-c have moved container holders 40a-c to drift spaces 90a-c, management module 15 receives a first container request 260a from inventory station 50d indicating that inventory station 50d has been activated.

In response to a container request 260, management module 15 may instruct an appropriate mobile drive unit 20 to deliver a container holder 40 from a drift space 90 to the requesting inventory station 50. If more than one container holder 40 are waiting in drift spaces 90, management module 15 selects one of the waiting container holders 40 to fulfill the received container request 260. Management module 15 may select the appropriate container holder 40 based on the length of time the selected container holder 40 has been waiting in its drift space 90, the number of containers the selected container holder 40 stores, a distance between the requesting inventory station 50 and the drift space 90 in which the selected container holder 40 is waiting, and/or any other suitable considerations or factors. For example, in FIG. 5, management module 15 manages the drifted container holders 40 waiting in drift spaces 90 in a first-in/first-out manner, with the container holder 40 that has been waiting for the longest amount of time being selected to fulfill received container requests 260. As a result, management module 15 selects container holder 40a to fulfill container request 260a.

After selecting a drifted container holder 40 to fulfill a received container request 260, management module 15 may instruct a particular mobile drive unit 20 to transport the drifted container holder 40 to the requesting inventory station 50. For example, in FIG. 5, management module 15 instructs mobile drive unit 20d to move container holder 40a to the requesting inventory station 50, inventory station 50d. The relevant mobile drive unit 20 may then move to and dock with the drifted container holder 40 and transport the drifted container holder 40 to the requesting inventory station 50. Thus, in the illustrated example, mobile drive unit 20d moves to container holder 40a and transports container holder 40a to inventory station 50d to fulfill first container request 260a (as shown by arrows 506 and 508, respectively).

In particular embodiments, management module 15 may replace container holders 40 that are released from drift spaces 90 to fulfill container requests 260. Specifically, management module 15 may select a container holder 40 from a storage space 76, a station where container holders 40 are loaded with containers 42, or any other location in inventory system 10 and dispatch a mobile drive unit 20 to move that container holder 40 to the vacated drift space 90. For example, in FIG. 5, management module 15 instructs mobile drive unit 20e to retrieve container holder 40d and move container

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holder 40d to the drift space 90 vacated by container holder 40a (as shown by arrows 510 and 512, respectively).

As a result, in particular embodiments, inventory system 10 may maintain a continually-restocked supply of container holders 40 in drift spaces 90 and may be able to fulfill multiple container requests 260 using container holders 40 waiting in drift spaces 90. To illustrate, FIG. 5 also shows management module 15 receiving a second container request 260b from inventory station 50b after fulfilling first container request 260a. Second container request 260b indicates, for example, that inventory station 50c has exhausted the supply of containers 42 stored by container holder 40z initially positioned next to inventory station 50c. In response to second container request 260b, management module 15 selects a container holder 40 (container holder 40b in FIG. 5) and instructs a particular mobile drive unit 20 (mobile drive unit 20f in FIG. 5) to move to and dock with the drifted container holder 40 (as shown by arrow 514). Additionally, management module 15 may also instruct a mobile drive unit 20 (not shown in FIG. 5) docked to the exhausted container holder 40 (container holder 40z in FIG. 5) to move the exhausted container holder 40 away from the requesting inventory station 50 (as shown by arrow 516) so that the transporting mobile drive unit 20 can then position the drifted container holder 40 next to the requesting inventory station 50 (as shown by arrow 518).

Thus, as FIG. 5 illustrates, drift spaces 90 can also be used to drift container holders 40, inventory holders 30, or other components of inventory system 10 when the final destination of the relevant component is not yet determined. This may allow inventory system 10 to position components such as container holders 40 and inventory holders 30 relatively near to several potential destinations prior to a need or use arising for the relevant component at a particular one of the destinations.

FIG. 6 is a flowchart illustrating example operation of the embodiment of inventory system 10 shown in FIG. 5. In particular, FIG. 6 illustrates the operation of inventory system 10 in fulfilling container requests 260 received by management module 15. The steps illustrated in FIG. 6 may be combined, modified, or deleted where appropriate, and additional steps may also be added to the flowchart. Additionally, the illustrated steps may be performed in any suitable order.

Operation begins in the described example with management module 15 positioning one or more container holders 40 in drift spaces 90, as shown by steps 600-608. In particular, management module 15 selects one or more container holders 40 and one or more mobile drive units 20 to transport the selected container holders 40 to drift spaces 90 at step 600. At step 602, management module 15 instructs the selected mobile drive units 20 to move to storage spaces 76 or other locations in which the selected container holders 40 are initially stored. At step 604, the selected mobile drive units 20 then move to and dock with the selected container holders 40.

At step 606, management module 15 instructs the selected mobile drive units 20 to move the selected container holders 40 to drift spaces 90. Each selected mobile drive unit 20 then moves a selected container holder 40 to a drift space 90 at step 608. In particular embodiments, the selected mobile drive units 20 may then undock and move away from the selected container holders 40, leaving the selected container holders 40 in drift spaces 90.

At step 610, the selected mobile drive units 20 subsequently wait in drift spaces 90 for a trigger event to occur. In particular embodiments, the trigger event relates to or is triggered by a need for containers 42 arising at a particular inventory station 50. For example, in the described embodiment, inventory stations 50 transmit container requests 260 to management module 15 to request delivery of containers 42 and/or to indicate their supply of containers 42 is exhausted. As a result, management module 15 determines, at step 612,

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whether management module 15 has received a container request 260. If not, operation returns to step 610 and the drifted container holders 40 continue to wait in drift spaces 90.

In response to determining it has received a container request 260, management module 15 selects, at step 614, one of the plurality of container holders 40 waiting in drift spaces 90 to fulfill the received container request 260. As noted above, management module 15 may select a container holder 40 to fulfill the received container request 260 based on any appropriate considerations or criteria. In particular embodiments, management module 15 selects the container holder 40 that has been waiting in drift spaces 90 for the longest period of time.

After selecting a particular container holder 40 to fulfill the received container request 260, management module 15 instructs a mobile drive unit 20 to move to and dock with the drifted container holder 40 at step 616 (e.g., by transmitting a task request 62 identifying the relevant drift space 90 and/or its location). In response, the selected mobile drive unit 20 moves to and docks with the drifted container holder 40 at step 618. At step 620, management module 15 instructs the selected mobile drive unit 20 to move the drifted container holder 40 to the requesting inventory station 50. The selected mobile drive unit 20 then moves the drifted container holder 40 from the drift space 90 in which that container holder 40 is waiting to the requesting inventory station 50 at step 622.

In particular embodiments, inventory system 10 may replace the released container holder 40 by moving another container holder 40 into drift spaces 90. This is illustrated in FIG. 6 in steps 624-632. In particular, management module 15 selects a replacement container holder 40 and a mobile drive unit 20 to transport the replacement container holder 40 at step 624. As explained above, management module 15 may select a replacement container holder 40 and a mobile drive unit 20 to transport the replacement container holder 40 based on any appropriate characteristics or considerations. At step 626, management module 15 instructs the selected mobile drive unit 20 to move to the replacement container holder 40. The selected mobile drive unit 20 moves to and docks with the replacement container holder 40 at step 628.

At step 630, management module 15 instructs the selected mobile drive unit 20 to move the replacement container holder 40 to the vacated drift space 90 (or another available drift space 90). At step 632, the selected mobile drive unit 20 moves the replacement container holder 40 to the vacated drift space 90. The replacement container holder 40 may then wait in the relevant drift space 90 until a trigger event associated with the replacement container holder 40 occurs (e.g., receipt of a container request 260 after the replacement container holder 40 has been in its drift space 90 longer than any other drifted container holders 40). Operation of inventory system 10 in responding to the received container request 260 may then end as shown in FIG. 6.

Although the present invention has been described with several embodiments, a myriad of changes, variations, alterations, transformations, and modifications may be suggested to one skilled in the art, and it is intended that the present invention encompass such changes, variations, alterations, transformations, and modifications as fall within the scope of the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. An inventory system, comprising:

- a plurality of inventory holders arranged within a plurality of storage locations within a workspace, the plurality of inventory holders configured to store inventory items;
- an inventory station configured to process inventory items received from one or more inventory holders, wherein the inventory station is adjacent to a queue of inventory holders; and

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a mobile drive unit comprising a self-powered robotic device that is capable of transporting an inventory holder to the inventory station for inventory item processing by: moving towards a storage location of the inventory holder;
moving beneath at least a portion of the inventory holder;
lifting the inventory holder by engaging a docking head against a lower receiving surface of the inventory holder;
transporting the inventory holder to an intermediate location that is remote from the queue of the inventory station, such that the inventory holder is at least temporarily stored at a location that is closer to the inventory station than the storage location; and
in response to a queue space being available in the queue to the inventory station, transporting the inventory holder from the intermediate location to the inventory station.

2. The inventory system of claim 1, wherein the inventory station is configured to fulfill requests for inventory items and the mobile drive unit is operable to transport the inventory holder to the inventory station based on the inventory holder storing at least one of the inventory items requested at the inventory station.

3. The inventory system of claim 1, wherein the intermediate location comprises one of a plurality of drift locations and the plurality of drift locations are utilized by the inventory system to systematically move inventory holders storing inventory items expected to be requested at the inventory station towards the inventory station, such that a time between a request for the inventory items stored by the inventory holders and an arrival of the inventory holders at the inventory station is reduced.

4. The inventory system of claim 1, further comprising a management module, wherein the management module facilitates completion of operation requests associated with inventory items by communicating instructions wirelessly to one or more mobile drive units by:

receiving an order requesting one or more inventory items;
determining the inventory holder storing at least one of the requested inventory items and an associated storage location;

instructing the mobile drive unit to retrieve the inventory holder from the associated storage location and instructing the mobile drive unit to transport the inventory holder storing the at least one of the requested inventory items to the intermediate location that is remote from the queue of the inventory station; and

in response to a queue space being available in the queue to the inventory station, instructing the mobile drive unit to transport the inventory holder from the intermediate location to the inventory station.

5. A mobile drive unit comprising:

a wireless receiver operable to receive instructions from a remote transmitter; and

one or more actuators operable to cause the mobile drive unit to:

move to a storage location of an inventory holder;
couple with the inventory holder;
transport the inventory holder from the storage location to a second location, the second location comprising a drift location, wherein the drift location is an intermediate location that is remote from an inventory station; and
remain at the intermediate location until a location at the inventory station is available.

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6. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the one or more actuators are further operable to, in response to a determination that a queue space at the inventory station is available, cause the mobile drive unit to transport the inventory holder from the drift location to the inventory station.

7. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the remote transmitter comprises a management module that, in response to receiving a request to complete an operation associated with one or more inventory items, instructs the mobile drive unit to transport the inventory holder to the intermediate location, such that the inventory holder is at least temporarily stored at the intermediate location.

8. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the inventory station is one of a plurality of inventory stations, and the inventory station is selected, by a management module coupled to the remote transmitter, from the plurality of inventory stations based at least in part on a condition in the inventory station.

9. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the intermediate locations are dynamically defined by a management module coupled to the remote transmitter according to one or more conditions of the inventory station.

10. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the mobile drive unit is selected from among a plurality of mobile drive units by a management module coupled to the remote transmitter based at least in part on a proximity of the mobile drive unit to the inventory holder.

11. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the mobile drive unit further comprises a self-powered robotic device operable to couple with the inventory holder and transport the inventory holder from the storage location to the intermediate location by:

moving towards the storage location of the inventory holder;

moving a portion of the mobile drive unit substantially beneath the inventory holder;

lifting the inventory holder by engaging a docking head against a lower receiving surface of the inventory holder; and

moving towards the intermediate location.

12. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the remote transmitter comprises a management module that communicates instructions to the mobile drive unit using wireless communication.

13. The mobile drive unit of claim 5, wherein the one or more actuators control the mobile drive unit in response to requests to complete one or more operations associated with inventory holders received by the wireless receiver from the remote transmitter.

14. An inventory system comprising:

a first mobile drive unit operable to transport a first inventory holder from a first storage location to a queue space associated with an inventory station; and

a second mobile drive unit operable to

transport a second inventory holder from a second storage location to a drift location, wherein the drift location is an intermediate location that is remote from the inventory station, such that the second inventory holder is at least temporarily stored at a location that is closer to the inventory station than the second storage location; and

in response to the first mobile drive unit exiting the queue space, transport the second inventory holder from the drift location to the inventory station.

15. The inventory system of claim 14, wherein the first and second inventory holders are selected from a plurality of inventory holders based at least in part upon a request to

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complete an operation associated with a first inventory item stored by the first inventory holder and a second inventory item stored by the second inventory holder.

16. The inventory system of claim 15, wherein the request is associated with an order for the first and second inventory items received from a customer and the system further comprises:

a third mobile drive unit operable to:

move to the inventory station, wherein the order for the first and second inventory items is at least partially completed at the inventory station;

couple with a third inventory holder at the inventory station, the third inventory holder containing the at least partially completed order; and

transport the third inventory holder to a shipping station for shipping to the customer associated with the at least partially completed order.

17. The inventory system of claim 15, wherein the inventory station is a first inventory station, the drift location is a first drift location, the request to complete an operation associated with two or more inventory items is a first request to complete an operation associated with two or more inventory items, and the second mobile drive unit is further operable to:

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transport the second inventory holder from the first inventory station to a second drift location based at least in part upon a second request to complete an operation associated with two or more inventory items at a second inventory station.

18. The inventory system of claim 14, further comprising a management module operable to instruct the first and second mobile drive units to transport the first and second inventory holders based at least in part upon a condition associated with the inventory system.

19. The inventory system of claim 14, wherein the mobile drive unit is a self-powered robotic device operable to freely move about a workspace associated with the inventory system.

20. The inventory system of claim 14, wherein the drift location is selected from a plurality of locations in a workspace based at least in part upon one or more of a distance between the drift location and the second storage location; a distance between the drift location and the inventory station; and a length of a path extending from the second storage location to the inventory station through the drift location.

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